



An Ecological Interpretation of Grasslands History

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Article Summary: Malin's work deserves to be better known. He shows that the early settlers of the Great Plains had to develop new tools and new ways of thinking to deal with an unfamiliar environment.

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AN ECOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION OF GRASSLANDS HISTORY

The Work of James C. Malin as Historian and as
Critic of Historians

BY THOMAS H. LE DUC

Winter Wheat in the Golden Belt of Kansas. A Study in adaptation to subhumid geographical environment. (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1944. xii+290 pp. Maps. \$3.00.)

Essays on Historiography. (Lawrence: Published by the author, 1541 University Drive, 1946. vi+188 pp. Litho-print from typescript. Papers. \$2.50.)

The Grassland of North America. Prolegomena to its history. (Lawrence: Published by the author, 1947. viii+398 pp. Litho-print from typescript. Papers. \$3.00.)

Grassland Historical Studies. Natural Resources Utilization in a Background of Science and Technology. Vol. I, Geology and Geography. (Lawrence: Published by the author, 1950. xii+377 pp. Litho-print from typescript. Papers. \$2.50.)

WITH the publication of the *Essays on Historiography* and *The Grassland of North America* it became apparent that James C. Malin now and for almost thirty years a teacher of history at the University of Kansas, was thinking about history and historical writing in ways that are fresh and fundamental. It is clear that he is not only an incisive critic of several basic hypotheses long and well regarded among historians, but also a creative worker of prodigious industry, immense learning, and disciplined imagination.

Malin's individual works have been reviewed in the learned journals and their originality recognized not only by historians but by specialists in other fields. To the non-academic public he is hardly known and even to the historical profession he is probably known for one or another particular work rather than for his historical system as a whole. If his ideas have been denied the wide circulation which by their importance they deserve, some explanation is in order.

Two practical difficulties may first be noted. For reasons not known to the reviewer, Malin has himself published his recent works and their distribution is not commercially promoted. In an age when even the presses of the universities and the learned societies undertake aggressive marketing, private publication is a handicap to wide dissemination. Nor do the appearance, format, and internal organization of the books encourage either sale or perusal. The text of the privately published volumes is lithographed from the author's typescript, somewhat reduced in size; the quotations, often running to several pages, are reduced even further. The effect is not only monotony but actual eye-strain. Even less tolerable is the defective inking in the 1950 volume.

Another factor, less easy to evaluate, that has delayed the full appreciation of Malin is the current unpopularity of many of his views. Because he presents them sometimes a little contentiously and always defends them skilfully, he has outraged the keepers of established, opposite, opinions. His suspicion of the welfare state, his distrust of collective planning, and his sturdy confidence in the worth and utility of individual intelligence will not commend him to New Dealers. He attacks the frontier hypothesis of Frederick Jackson Turner, the relativism of Charles A. Beard, and the calculated deceptions of the Roosevelt-Wallace publicists. Added together, these expressions will alienate a broad section of the academic historical profession.

Quite apart from the practical obstacles and the unpopularity of his views, it must be recognized that Malin's work is not always easy to use. He plants few signposts for

the reader. His terminology is not always unmistakable, his organization is often sketchy, and his interpretation of the meaning and significance of the materials is often fragmentary. The difficulty is all the greater because few of his readers will bring to their study a knowledge of the sciences from which Malin has drawn so much.

Malin's basic ideas are, however, perfectly comprehensible. His is a common-sense, practical approach to history. He erects no elaborate theoretic framework on his premises. He scorns determinism of any sort and repudiates all single-factor interpretations that pretend to explain history in terms of some monistic system of causation. (*Essays on Historiography*, p. 145.)

He believes, rather, that the history of a society must be studied as an unfolding experience in which the operation of independent variables leaves open and indeterminate the course of development to various possibilities. The geographical environment is absolutely determinative only within fairly wide limits of tolerance. Inside these limits man has to perfect the optimum adaptation. The significant factor in the process is creative intelligence operating in an atmosphere of freedom. "The individual is the ultimate creative force in civilization." (*Essays on Historiography*, p. 130.)

This emphasis on the role of the individual intelligence as the dynamic element in society is projected by Malin in relation to the total cultural milieu. One might describe his approach as that of a cultural anthropologist at work on recent history. Time is a more significant dimension for Malin than space. He points out again and again the folly of isolating for historical study any segment, topical or geographical, of human activity. The chronological period is, he thinks, the only useable unit. Individual and social behavior are not to be understood as aggregations of independent and unrelated departments but as parts of a whole. Time is the unifying element. (*Essays on Historiography*, pp. 148-149.)

A culture is not only unified by simultaneous interplay of its several elements at a particular moment, but is

continuously and meaningfully attached to the past. At any given point in history society is affected more by the total heritage of concepts, habits, and techniques than by fresh thinking. Revision although uneven in pace is continuous and not catastrophic. In that view there are no real revolutions but only succession phases in the culture.

It will be seen that Malin is not only a student of history but a philosopher. His concern with the nature of the historical process leads him to take a strong position in defining the place of the historian in society and his definition in turn raises questions of historical method to which he addresses himself.

The historians who work in materials unrelated directly to the Great Plains know Malin as a critic of historical relativism. The relativist argument was most elaborately and clearly stated in America by the late Charles A. Beard. In a number of polemics published in the 1930s, Beard advanced a point of view that has had widespread acceptance. He began by attacking the "illusion" of historians that they could achieve objectivity and certainty. He insisted that the writing of history is a subjective process, that historical writing cannot recover the past because the historian is a captive of his own time and a victim of his own frame of reference and climate of opinion. Historical writing was, for Beard, an "act of faith," an interpretation of the past from a particular point in space and time. The utility of historical writing was as an instrument or weapon to promote social change.

All this Malin finds not merely distasteful but mischievous. While acknowledging that theoretical and, at a given moment, practical limits to certainty do exist, he reaffirms his faith in the possibility of certainty and asserts that we can and must develop new methods that will extend its limits.

By resourceful experimentation Malin has contributed solidly to the perfecting of these new methods. That service is perhaps the best reply to the relativists. It seems probable that his identification of relativist history as a form of intellectual suicide clearing the way for the victory of some

kind of collectivist state will serve less to refute the relativists than to generate misgivings about Malin's own political position.

Because he operates in the field of Great Plains history, it has escaped notice that Malin's quest for new methods of organizing regional history has produced a significant contribution to the methods and content of intellectual history. His prime interest is really the relation of ideas to action; studies of grassland adaptation afford the medium. His analyses of specific idea-action relationships introduce a precise method into a field that has been beset with subjectivism, diffusiveness, and want of coherence.

Some idea of the place of Malin in the larger historical world has been suggested. Since further volumes of the *Grassland Historical Studies* are promised, a systematic analysis of his thought would be premature. But, because the titles are not immediately indicative of the scope of his works, some description may be useful. It is quite impossible in an essay of this length to do more than suggest the extensiveness of the material developed in 1,250 pages of extremely compact prose.

Malin's interpretation of grassland history can properly be called ecological. Attention may here be called to his recent article, "Ecology and History" in the *Scientific Monthly*, May, 1950 (70: 295-298). The central theme of all his works is the process of adaptation to the subhumid grasslands environment by the white man. In order to live effectively on the plains, European man had to reformulate much of his thinking. Malin reminds us that a hundred years is a short time in human history and that in the last century a number of blind alleys have been explored and a lot of progress has been made. Man had first to shed the old conceit that he could conquer and rule nature. He had to learn the kindergarten lesson: that he must adapt and adjust to nature. His European culture had enabled him to occupy the forest-clad eastern United States and this success had led him to forget that his ways of land utilization there were essentially in harmony with the dictates of environment.

When, however, he crossed the Missouri and entered on the subhumid zone he was confronted with an environment with which neither his tools nor his ways of thinking had equipped him to deal. It was not simply that he knew little about the climate and the soils, but that his cultural heritage was so alien as positively to obstruct clear thinking about the grassland. He could understand seasonal and geographical variations in rainfall, but he could not at first conceive of critical fluctuations from year to year. He had to learn the hard way that tree-planting, settlement, and quack rainmakers could not change the climate.

By experiment, improvisation, and borrowing, he had to find crops and crop strains that would supply dependable modes of land utilization. In *Winter Wheat* (1944) Malin studies the problem of adaptation from 1870 to 1900 in four counties of mid rainfall Kansas. Conspicuous in the story is the introduction of hard red winter wheats of southeastern Europe by the Mennonite immigrants from Russia, and the experiments with new methods of tillage. Here, as in all his writings, Malin underlines the high value of folk experience in working out intelligent crop practices. The state agricultural colleges did not always do as well; before 1890 the private farms were the real experiment stations and it was private intelligence rather than the public state that developed the strains of wheat that would mature before mid-summer heat, would resist rust, and would withstand winter cold.

In *Grassland Historical Studies* (1950), subtitled *Geology and Geography*, Malin is concerned with the problem of metropolitan growth, with special reference to Kansas City as a commercial center. About three-fourths of the book is devoted to the history of the city from 1850 to 1876 as reconstructed mainly from local newspapers. This work on Kansas City is a fragment, to be used as a source rather than as a synthesis. Of more general interest is the first quarter of the volume, a summary of early geological research in coal and building materials. Malin reminds us that as late as 1850 ours was a culture built on wood and that the absence of trees on the grassland required

new adaptations for fuel and lumber. This portion of the book, although providing a useful summary, lacks adequate interpretation.

Without doubt Malin's most important book is *The Grassland of North America* (1947). Here we have a collection of critical essays all related to grassland adaptation. The first part of the book is a summary of the development of the various ecological sciences—climatology, botany, pedology, animal and insect ecology. These chapters, together with the extensive bibliographies, are of great utility not only for the scientific detail but for the general instruction of the historian. Malin establishes the scientific orientation for plains history; no one who works over this material can escape realizing the absurdity of the impressionistic, anecdotal writings that have posed as scholarship. The second section of the book, which Malin calls "historiography," might more properly be subtitled "the history of early thought about the grassland region." He has here gathered up in summary much that is significant but ephemeral. Following this section comes a series of chapters that might be called "experiments in historical methods," summarizing some of Malin's own work on human occupation in Kansas.

To appreciate *The Grassland of North America* fully one must read *Essays on Historiography* and, in particular, the paper on the Turner-Mackinder Space Concept. Taking the two volumes together, Malin makes two major points that have not so far been underlined in this review. He challenges the fundamental implication of the Turner hypothesis. Turner announced in 1893 that the frontier was gone and the supply of usable land exhausted. By asserting that the availability of free land had conditioned, indeed determined, the development of American institutions up to that point, he implied that America had reached the catastrophic end of the first chapter of her history. Nonsense, says Malin. The critical element is not land entry but land use. What really matters is intelligent adaptation to environment. The frontier is not closed as long as we are moving towards that goal. Turner's frontier is gone. The

shabby, exploitative, wasteful west of the 1820's is happily lost. The scrubby cattle are replaced by the more efficient Herefords; the paltry corn is supplanted by new hybrids; the primitive tillage is succeeded by new techniques. Out of experiment and innovation has come enrichment.

Malin's second main point is that culture, as a response or adjustment to environment, is a unit. He understands that reality is to be understood not as fixed structure but as a phase of process. The branches of knowledge are not islands to themselves but merely convenient divisions for purposes of study. They interact among themselves; the botanists find new insights in the study of glaciation; the zoologists study chemistry, and the geologists study physics. More important still, their whole conceptual framework, their ways of thinking, the kinds of questions they ask, are determined in relation to the whole culture.

In his ecological interpretation of grassland history Malin has made an original contribution to thinking about human experience in North America. The nearest parallel to his methodology and interpretation is to be found in the voluminous works of Harold A. Innis of the University of Toronto who for thirty years has been teaching Canadians to understand their history as a series of pioneering processes in resources utilization. His emphasis on the strategy of general and special technology in relation to natural environment is allied in concept to the work of Malin. Both have set up the goal of total history, of cultural synthesis. Innis has, until recently, concentrated heavily on the frontiers of extractive industry—fur, fish, forest, and mine—where the unfamiliar environment introduced problems of adaptation as recalcitrant as those of the grasslands. But the relation of man to these regions has remained essentially transient and peripheral; the patterns of occupation are correspondingly unlike those of regions of agriculture.

Long after Innis had acquired an international reputation the historical profession in Canada finally discovered him. One wonders how long it will be until James C. Malin is as fully appreciated by the historians as by the scientists and economists.